

# Facilitating Holistic Curriculum Planning in Schools

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A school's curriculum program, to optimally accommodate students, must be based on an overall planning strategy that fosters the program's development, implementation, and evaluation. Otherwise, the curriculum program can be without order, direction, or priorities. Moreover, highly promising educational practices all too often fail because of the lack of an overall curriculum planning strategy, and the blame for such failure is frequently placed on the practices themselves, instead of on poor planning procedures.

## Holistic Curriculum Planning

Curriculum planning is too often inconsistent and disorganized, resulting in a patchwork quilt of curriculum designs and ineffectual instructional experiences. Effective curriculum planning, on the other hand, is a holistic process conducted within an overarching operational/organizational framework on a cooperative, coordinated, and continuous basis.

Holistic planning is characterized by district-wide planning committees and school-based planning groups working together. Essentially, district-level planning committees coordinate the school system's curriculum policies, programs, and practices. School-based committees plan curriculum activities in individual schools. Nevertheless, school committees always function within the structure of the district's general educational policies. There might also be situational planning in which a curriculum specialist directly assists teachers interested in using a new procedure or program. The specialist works with teachers in the classroom, makes sure that they have necessary information and materials, and creates a positive climate in which the teachers are able to discuss problems and share ideas.

A number of conditions must be satisfied in order to effectively implement the holistic curriculum planning

concept. First, enough time must be allowed for planning. Second, school professionals must be informed about the holistic planning process, and they must be provided with materials and financial resources. Finally, well-trained curriculum specialists must be available for consultation.

## Holistic Planning and Other Approaches

*Centralized curriculum planning* is one alternative to holistic planning. The centralized approach identifies and works on district-level curriculum problems (e.g., developing district educational goals/outcomes and evaluation criteria). Planning is typically done by committees with district-wide representation.

Advantages of centralized planning include district-wide teacher representation on planning committees and teacher participation in identification of district-wide problems. A risk involved in district-formulated curriculum strategies, programs, and materials is that solutions will be uniformly imposed on schools regardless of each school's particular needs and problems. For example, a district-designed student evaluation system may fail to take into account that students' widely differentiated abilities and learning styles require that individualized evaluation techniques be used within each school.

*Decentralized curriculum planning* is another approach. This approach identifies and works on curriculum problems in individual buildings (e.g., designing an individualized mathematics program). Planning is done by committees and in informal situations.

Because decentralized planning is characterized by little, if any, cooperation and coordination with the district or between schools, various problems can result. For example, students transferring from a school with a textbook-based social studies program to a school having an interdisciplinary theme-centered program might feel confused. Decentralized planning is, however, especially well suited for enabling teachers to identify and prioritize building-level problems and for adapting the curriculum to each student's particular characteristics and objectives.

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*Holistic curriculum planning* eliminates the disadvantages, but retains and improves the advantages, of both centralized and decentralized planning. The holistic approach, by combining district- and building-level planning, enhances the organizational, developmental, management, and assessment aspects of curriculum planning. In holistic planning, district-wide planning groups, besides being involved in actual planning, also focus and coordinate the overall planning enterprise. Moreover, individual school-based planning is closely correlated not only with the district but with other schools as well.

Holistic planning also enables teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, parents, and other lay persons to participate in integrated district and school planning. The resultant coordination among district and school planning groups enhances K-12 curriculum sequencing as well as curriculum correlation and consistency across specific grade and school levels.

### Phases of Holistic Planning

For holistic planning to be most effective, it should be undertaken in the following phases: identifying and studying curriculum problems and needs; planning; piloting; implementation; and appraisal. First, district-wide planning committees and school-based planning groups identify curriculum through such means as interviews, inventories, and surveys. Following this, the problems are rank ordered and dealt with on a prioritized basis. Next, one or more study groups are formed; the groups analyze and evaluate the problems, delineate basic aims, and determine a course of action. To these ends, the groups examine research findings, hire consultants, and attend relevant conferences and workshops.

One or more planning committees are subsequently formed to develop objectives, methodologies, and evaluation devices. When information is needed, it is obtained through procedures such as those mentioned above for studying curriculum problems and needs. The implementation plan, timetable, and budget are formulated in the planning phase. Then, a pilot study team carefully implements, monitors, and evaluates the plan on a limited basis. Depending on the outcomes of the pilot study, the plan might be adopted in its entirety, might be slightly or significantly modified from its original version, or might not be used at all. The planning process does not end even if a plan is ultimately implemented; instead, the plan is continually monitored, evaluated, and adjusted.

Sweezy (1985) suggests a curriculum planning model reflective of these holistic planning phases. Essentially, a core committee—teachers, district office representatives, and school administrators—analyzes the goals and objectives of the particular subject-area program. Upon the core committee's selection of priority objectives, sub-committees then investigate specific problems. Next, core teachers implement a "school-based tryout," and necessary revisions are made. Inservice

teams then develop strategies; individual school committees are also involved in ongoing discussion and study. The core committee helps the school committees with further refinements and provides new research information.

### The Shaker Heights Curriculum Planning Model

The Shaker Heights, Ohio, City School District—with approximately 5,000 students housed in five K-4 buildings, a 5-6 building, a 7-8 middle school, and a 9-12 high school—exemplifies holistic curriculum planning in actual practice. The Shaker Heights model features an Instructional and Administrative Council, K-12 subject-area committees, and building-based planning groups (Paces 1992).

The Instructional and Administrative Council, comprised of all building principals, central office staff members (including curriculum specialists), and the president of the teacher's association, meets on a monthly basis. K-12 subject-area committees include teachers and department heads or principals in charge of each subject area. The committees, which develop courses of study, instructional strategies, resource materials, and evaluation techniques, are organized on a K-12 basis to ensure communication between grade levels. The director of curriculum oversees the total K-12 planning process and is assisted by those in charge of each subject-area committee.

Representatives from each of the district's elementary and secondary schools generally serve on the subject-area committees. Courses of study, developed by the committees, are presented to the Board of Education, which reviews and edits them and then sends them to the Ohio Department of Education for approval.

Curriculum planning in the district is conducted within the context of the Ohio Department of Education's curricular frameworks for the different subject areas. The frameworks are based on the guidelines of such organizations as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Council on Science and Technology. The department of education subsequently evaluates the curriculum programs in terms of its various frameworks.

### Participants in Curriculum Planning

#### Teachers

Holistic planning requires substantive teacher involvement in curriculum development, at both the district-wide and building levels. For example, teachers in Shaker Heights analyze students' needs, conduct research, discuss parent input, write or revise courses of study, field test the curriculum, monitor student progress, and evaluate student outcomes.

Moreover, teacher representatives on the K-12 subject-area committees are responsible for informing their colleagues about the work of the committees on which

they serve and for reporting their colleagues' reactions back to the committees. Staff development programs also help to keep faculty members apprised of curriculum activities and newly adopted resources.

Teachers who participate in planning are more likely to accept change and to put the new curriculum into practice (Billings 1989). Also, as Haberman (1992) notes, more teacher participation in curriculum planning results in "improved teacher self-concept, their greater sense of responsibility and commitment to the school and the curriculum, and increased student motivation" (17). By the very nature of their responsibilities, teachers must be an integral part of the planning process. In fact, Tyler (1987) states that the teacher is the most significant factor in implementing school reform. Consequently, every effort must be made to ensure not only that teachers have a thorough understanding of curriculum theory and practice, but also that they possess the requisite skills for competently planning instruction and for making sound decisions about aligning the curriculum with students' wide-ranging differences.

Unit teaching is an excellent way for the teacher to translate the curriculum into classroom practice and to accommodate students' individual differences. The teaching unit, with its broad array of objectives, content items, activities, materials, and evaluation devices organized around a topic, provides not only for student differences but for student-teacher planning and subject integration as well. A unit might include activities such as computer-based learning, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and study projects. McIntosh and Vaughn (1992) discuss how a unit resource notebook can serve as an organizational technique. The unit resource notebook, in the form of a large, three-ring binder, might hold such components as teaching ideas, visual aids, reading/study guides, and bulletin board sketches.

#### *Community Members*

Holistic planning is further characterized by the participation of lay citizens, who attend district-wide curriculum planning committee meetings and serve on school-based planning committees. Lay citizens are appropriately involved with school professionals in identifying, thinking about, and discussing curriculum program issues and problems. For instance, lay citizens could be involved in debating whether or not to implement a sex education program. If the program is ultimately adopted, the lay participants might then provide input concerning such matters as the sex education program's general purposes, priorities, and procedures. School professionals remain in charge of diagnosing students' learning difficulties and needs and making decisions about incorporating instructional objectives, content items, activities, materials, and evaluation devices into actual teaching-learning situations.

The Shaker Heights Curriculum Planning Model has a Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) Curriculum Commit-

tee that provides input to teachers and administrators on curriculum issues. An elementary issues committee, comprised of parents, gives its reactions to curriculum presentations made by teachers, principals, and central office staff. Parents also volunteer in the schools and offer feedback to faculty members and administrators.

The Shaker Heights community is periodically surveyed to determine public opinion regarding curriculum and financial matters. Parents and teachers also plan together at the individual building level. The planning typically addresses such issues as parent-teacher conferences, curriculum programs, and school/community concerns.

#### *School Leaders*

Holistic planning requires competent planning leadership along with full and meaningful teacher involvement. The school principal often has responsibility for both administrative and curriculum matters. Consequently, the principal's training must include not only courses and field work in administration but also a substantial concentration in curriculum theory and planning and a supervised curriculum field experience. Pajak and McAfee (1992) point out that principals, to be successful curriculum leaders, not only need to understand curriculum organization and the place of instructional activities, materials, and learning outcomes in the curriculum, but also must be able to formulate strategies, coordinate curriculum activities, and monitor the program.

The principal's curriculum concentration, by emphasizing the group process and providing knowledge of planning principles, strategies, materials, and assessment procedures, enhances his or her ability to effectively function as a planning leader. Ornstein and Hunkins (1988) suggest various guidelines regarding the principal's role in curriculum change, including the need for the principal to have good human relations skills as well as a thorough understanding of the staff, school system, and community.

Another approach to leadership in planning is to have a full-time curriculum specialist in each school. The specialist is consistently available to work with individual teachers and planning groups; to ensure the coordination of school-based planning with district-wide policies and priorities; and to keep the planning process on track.

The curriculum specialist could also involve one or more teachers in situational planning. For example, some middle school teachers might be interested in making use of independent study projects. The specialist, upon becoming aware of this interest, could hold periodic group meetings to present information and materials, share ideas, and discuss problems. The specialist could also visit classrooms and consult with individual teachers. Other teachers, as they observe the success of independent study, might also want to try it.

### Computer-Assisted Curriculum Planning

Computers can greatly aid holistic curriculum planning. They can store each subject's full array of teaching-learning components in the form of single subject and/or subject-integrated instructional organizing centers. Teachers can then draw specific teaching units and lesson plans, for group and individual situations, from the computer-based organizing centers.

A major advantage of the centers is that teaching materials from out-of-school sources, such as state education departments, regional educational agencies, and teacher centers, can be easily correlated with the instructional organizing centers' ideas of objectives and activities. Another feature of computer-assisted planning is the use of the database for problem solving. In this case, the computer, upon being fed statements of curriculum problems, produces informational items for resolving the problems. The computer, in addition to generating suggestions of possible options, might also suggest resources such as curriculum guides, descriptions of exemplary programs, annotated bibliographies, and research reports.

### Additional Curriculum Planning Models

A number of other school systems have also employed holistic curriculum planning principles. For example, Lathrop (1988) describes a planning structure in the Fullerton, California, Joint Union High School District by which lay citizens on an advisory board participate in program development and implementation. Quattrone (1989) explains how a subject-integrated middle school curriculum was designed in the Greenwich, Connecticut, Public Schools, featuring district-wide committees, building-based teams, and collaborative planning by curriculum coordinators. Quilling, Martin, and Hartsfield (1990) describe a statewide planning system developed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the University of Missouri-Columbia's Department of Practical Arts and Vocational-Technical Education. In this system, teachers and other educational professionals serve on curriculum steering and satellite committees to plan and implement curriculum materials in home economics and other vocational areas.

Scarborough (1988) relates how the Illinois Model for Staff Curriculum Development was designed to incorporate such procedures as teacher formulation of objec-

tives and task lists; field testing; evaluation; and curriculum revision. Scarr (1988) discusses a planning structure in Lake Washington School District #414, Kirkland, Washington, that emphasizes such approaches as central office and building-based planning and the identification and analysis of community needs and administrator/faculty expectations. And Vickery (1990) explains how a planning system in the Johnson City, New York, Central School District was designed to accommodate such factors as staff development, curriculum organization, community support, and evaluation.

### Conclusion

A school's curricular program, unless it is undergirded by a comprehensive planning strategy, will tend to be sporadic and haphazard. Holistic planning, however, because it is cooperative, coordinated, and continuous, offers an overall planning strategy for producing an optimally balanced, integrated and responsive curriculum program.

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